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Conservation Planning— You and Your Land



Conservation Planning You and Your Land

Two-thirds of the land in America is owned by private landowners. These landowners are responsible for the present and future condition of the soil, water, and other natural resources on their land.

All land is not the same. Take a good look at the land you own or use. Observe how it differs from your neighbors'. Most likely your land has several soil types. Soils vary in depth, drainage, erodibility, natural productivity, slope, texture, and stoniness. Other resources—water, plants, and animals—also vary from one property to another. These characteristics will affect how you use your land. Because your land is unique, so should be the planning for its uses.

You use your land differently from anyone else. You don't have exactly the same equipment or manage the land the same. You don't grow the same crops, apply the same fertilizers, keep the same kind and number of livestock, or have the same goals and objectives. However, in some ways you are like all land users: you continually plan how to manage your land. Short-term plans may include crops to grow and livestock to raise or sell. Long-term plans may consider protecting or developing soil and water resources.

You probably do a lot of thinking and planning about how to farm more efficiently and how to protect the soil from wind and water erosion so that it will continue to produce good crops year after year. You may also plan how to use your land for purposes other than farming. This is just the beginning of conservation planning.

Supersedes

What Is a Farm Conservation Plan?

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Help is Available

Conservation planning assistance is available through the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. SCS provides free help through this voluntary participation program, which is available to all land users through the soil and water conservation districts. Conservation districts are local units of government which are guided by a governing board made up of local farmers, ranchers, other land users, and community leaders in a county.

Help from your local SCS soil conservationist may be requested through your conservation district. Although most SCS assistance is provided to farmers and ranchers on cropland, pasture, rangeland, and forest land, you can also get assistance with solving conservation problems on nonagricultural land uses, such as controlling erosion on construction sites or on public lands.



A district conservationist and a farm manager discuss a conservation plan for a wildlife management farm.

Planning Together

Conservation planning involves several steps. The first step in planning is taking an inventory. Because a knowledge of soils is basic to planning the use and treatment of your land, SCS will provide you with a soils map, which includes a description of your soils and how they can be used. Each soil is described in terms of its texture, characteristics, capabilities, limitations, and erosion potential. SCS will also estimate soil erosion rates under present and planned land uses.

When you are ready to start, you and the soil conservationist will discuss the soils, your plans and goals, your resource problems, and your conservation program. You tell the soil conservationist which crops you want to grow, the livestock you want to keep, the wildlife or recreation uses you want to plan, and any other interests you have that will affect your land. The conservationist will have detailed data about your soil types and limitations, erosion potential, and production capability for your land and will help you interpret the data. Together you can explore different ways to overcome problems and to make better use of the soil. You can discuss soil and water management needs by individual fields on a total-farm basis.

Many things may be involved as you consider alternatives for your land. Major changes may be needed. Some cropland may need specific treatment to control erosion. Some cropland may need to be converted to use as pasture or for trees, recreation, or wildlife habitat. You may need to plant better forage species to improve rangeland or pasture. You may want to improve your woodland or improve wildlife habitat. You may have a good location for a farm pond for recreation, fire protection, livestock, or irrigation water. The conservationist can show you how these alternatives will meet your goals and also protect your land for many years.

The Decisions Are Yours

The next step is deciding exactly how you are going to use your land. The SCS conservationist will outline and discuss the different ways you can accomplish your goals and help you determine the effects on your total operation before you make the decisions.

Decisions are needed on both the use of the land and its treatment. When you make a decision on land use, you will need to consider how to treat each field to get the desired results. These treatments are known as conservation practices. Usually several practices are used in combination to solve resource problems, resulting in a resource management system.

For example, on level cropland, the practices may be fertilizing and liming, crop rotation, and a form of crop residue management, such as no-till. On sloping cropland, you may need the additional resource protection of a terrace system, stripcropping, or grassed waterways.

On pasture, you may decide to plant both cool- and warm-season grasses or grasses and legumes. This will permit rotating pastures to provide grazing through the summer and fall months without weakening pasture vitality or making the land susceptible to erosion.

On forest land, you may plan to selectively thin the stand by cutting firewood, or you may plan to protect young trees from livestock grazing. Specific areas, borders, and fields may be selected to manage for wildlife habitat.

You make the decisions. The SCS conservationist can give many good alternatives and make some economic comparisons, but you must decide what you want to do, when, and how. Consider your available time, equipment, and economic situation.

The SCS conservationist can help you understand these conservation practices, how they fit together in a resource management system, and what is necessary to provide the maintenance for continued effectiveness in the future. He or she will record your decisions and other suggestions in your plan and will help you in scheduling and applying planned conservation. This plan will provide a guide for you for the next several years. It can be modified as your goals and objectives change.

Applying Conservation Practices

The final step in your conservation plan is putting the plan into operation. You and the conservationist select the best time to build terraces, waterways, and other soil-conserving measures. Other practices that do not involve construction, such as crop residue use, field borders, and stripcropping, can be scheduled to fit into your operation at the best time.

Your neighbors and the conservation district directors can often help you find the equipment you need. They can also suggest contractors who do good jobs on pond excavations, irrigation pipe installation, or timber harvesting.

SCS can assist with applying the practices, such as laying out grade lines for terraces, contour lines for stripcropping, and blueprints for water control structures. They have information about tree and shrub nurseries, and they can direct you to neighbors who have applied conservation practices similar to those you will be using. Special assistance may also be obtained from other federal, state, and local agencies; from private companies or organizations; and from SCS specialists such as foresters, agronomists, range conservationists, and biologists.



SCS assisted in designing these three ponds for irrigation, wildlife habitat, and livestock watering.

Keep Your Plan Current

Your planning decisions, written into the conservation plan, provide you with a ready reference guide for your year-to-year operations. Market prices or other circumstances may change, making a change in your planning decisions and your conservation plan desirable. SCS conservationists can help you revise the land use and conservation treatment where needed.

Remember, in conservation planning—

- The program is voluntary and flexible
- You make the decisions and carry them out, including maintenance for a long and useful life of practices installed
- It is your plan for the land you own or use
- SCS and conservation districts are ready to help you.



Corn is being planted in crop stubble between terraces.

For More Information

For assistance and more detailed information, contact your local conservation district or the Soil Conservation Service. They are listed in the telephone directory. The Soil Conservation Service is listed under United States Government, Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service. Assistance is available without regard to race, creed, color, sex, age, handicap, or national origin.



Selective cuttings are made periodically in this well-managed woodlot.